PRIVATE ARCHIVES IN INDIA—IDENTIFICATION OF THEIR PROBLEMS

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The lines of demarcation between private and public archives are so blurred that it is not easy to differentiate one from the other, but our present purpose would be served if we define private archives as those documents which accumulate through the activities of individuals, families, business and industrial undertakings etc., as opposed to those which normally gather in government offices and are rightly designated as public archives.

Private archives have lesser chance of being insincere or garbled than any official report. Confided to paper in the course of normal transactions of an individual or an institution, private archives reflect the under currents of history better than the dressed up documents. It is, therefore, not surprising to note that the importance of private archives has increasingly been realised by the historians whose attention is focussed on the people, their economic and social welfare, their achievements and aspirations.

Seen in the above context the archival wealth in private custody falls into the following broad categories as for as India is concerned :

(i) Archives of business and industrial houses;

(ii) Archives of religious institutions;

(iii) Archives of political parties and trade unions;

(iv) Archives of educational institutions;

(v) Archives of former princely families and landed aristocracy;

(vi) Archives of eminent personalities in various spheres.

Some of the above mentioned private archives have adversely been affected by the rapidly changing social and economic conditions during the last few decades. Recent legislative changes have rendered preservation of some of the private archives unnecessary for they are no longer required as potential evidence for legal purposes. The situation has been further aggravated by the break-up of princely states and abolition of *Zamindari*. Compelled by economic pressures, the erstwhile landed aristocracy has been forced to move into smaller houses with inadequate space for storing their private archives and its reduced staff has no time to take practical interest in old records which have nothing but sentimental value for their owners.

Neglected by their owners, private archives pose problems which are as various as they are complicated. It is, therefore, not possible to attempt a comprehensive analysis in a short time at our disposal. We shall, therefore, content ourselves, for the present, to discuss them under four broad headings viz. survey listing, emigration and access.

Survey

Systematic survey of private archives was initiated by the Government of India at the instance of the Indian Historical Records Commission when it set up several *ad-hoc* Regional Records Survey Committees in 1942.[1] In the post-war years these *ad-hoc* committees were replaced by permanent committees. As present such committees exist in Andhra Pradesh Assam, Bihar, Delhi, Gujarat, Jammu and Kashmir, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Orisa, Rajasthan, Tripura and Uttar Pradesh. A couple of these Committees have done commendable work in unearthing number of collections of private archives but this was mainly due to the devoted efforts of a handful of individuals. The reasons for the failure of most of such Committees are not far to seek.

Composition of these Committees follows more or less the same pattern. They are generally headed by Minister in charge of Education or high officials of the State as also the local members of he Commission—mostly Professors of History in the concerned region with the Directors of State Archives generally serving as Conveners or Secretaries.

Appointed by State Governments these Committees are generally looked upon with suspicion and their efforts are interpreted by the custodians of private archives as an attempt to deprive them of their heirlooms for which they have deep rooted sentimental attachment. This prejudice is compounded by the ignorance of the owners who are afraid of letting out their family secrets, if their archives are allowed to be exploited by researchers.

Listing

Closely connected with survey is the work of listing, with a view to evolve a well-articulated system of a country wide survey and listing, the Government of India launched the project of National Register of Private Records in 1959. It initiated a central grant-in-aid of Rs. 3,000 annually to such States and Union Territories as would conduct Surveys and list private papers for the purpose of the National Register. In this project the following States and Union Territories participated: Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Bihar, Delhi, Gujarat, Jammu and Kashmir, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Mysore, Orissa, Punjab, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal.

The Central aid continued for a decade but no significant achivement was made. The States and Union Territories considered the *grant-in-aid* to be much too meagre for operating the scheme in a sustained manner. More over the states which operated the project more vigorously received the same sum as those whose output was moderate or poor. In the light of these considerations the Government of India decided in 1970 that it would be more appropriate for the State Governments, on whom the primary responsibility for survey work lay, to finance the scheme out of their own funds, making it a state plan item to secure central aid.

Subsequently on the recommendations of the Estimate Committee of the Fourth Lok Sabha (1968-69)[2] the Government of India agreed to include the National Register Scheme in the Fourth Plan and set up a small

Unit in the National Archives of India. This Unit has brought out nine volumes of National Register comprising the material received between 1959-60 and 1967-68 but is now confronted with the problem of the dearth of data which the states are not in a position to collect owing to paucity of funds. Under the circumstances, the National Register was required to set up several Units in the States for conducting a survey and listing of private records in the Fifth Plan. This scheme, though modest, appears to be practicable but what is the guarantee that the papers would not disperse after they have been listed? How can we ensure that they would not be exported to foreign countries? This leads us to the problem of emigration.

Emigration

Conscious of such hazards, the Commission had recommended enactment of legislation as early as 1930[3]. The Government of India responded to this demand by enacting the Antiquities (Export Control) Act 1947. In this Act the term antiquity has been defined as including, among other things, manuscript which have been in existence for not less than hundred years[4]. It thus leaves out all records and documents which are not in manuscript. This lacuna was set right by the Antiquities and Art Treasures Act of 1972 which purports to prevent export of antiquities, including, 'manuscript', record, or other document which is of scientific, historical, literary or aesthetic value and which has been in existence for not less than seventy five years[5]. It also provides for compulsory acquisition by Government of such materials, if necessary, for being kept in a public place 'after paying compensation to the owners.[6] Under this Act, records more than 75 years old (excepting those which contain paintings, illustrations or illuminations), do not come within the purview of licensing and registration like other art objects.

This lacuna in the Act provides increasing opportunity for records changing hands, clandestine trade in and even wilful destruction of such material by the owners. Another lacuna noticeable is the fact that the Act does not suggest any measure for proper maintenance and preservation of antiquities even after registration. The onous of conservation has been left to the owners.

Conservation

The neglect of private archives has already done irrepairable damage and a good deal has succummed to the ravages of time leaving wide gaps in our history which can not be filled. In many cases they have been eaten up by insects. The effects of climate, damp, heat and cold have accelerated the decay of private archives which are as frail as precious. The owners of such archives are mostly unaware of the scientific processes which can endow fresh lease of life to their papers. Those who are aware of such processes can not afford conservation of their collections on scientific lines.

The National Archives, no doubt tenders technical advice in this behalf to those owners of private archives who approach it. It is also true that whenever such records are brought to its notice, and if they are considered so valuable as be of national importance, the National Archives repairs them free of cost and retains microfilm transcript of the concerned record while the original is returned to the owner. Such attempts, though made on every small scale are laudable but in the absence of precise guidelines, it

is some time difficult to determine which private records qualify to be designated as of national importance and which do not. Moreover conservation facilities available at the National Archives and in a couple of State Archives are too inadequate to cope with the huge archival wealth in private custody.

Access

Of greater concern to the scholars is the problem of access. The owners are mostly ignorant of the value of their archives and as such fail to appreciate the anxiety of scholars to exploit them for purposes of research. Some of the owners do not allow access to their papers under the plea that papers are in a poor state of preservation.

The problems of private archives which we have just identified relate to survey, listing, emigration, conservation and access. The bureaucratic and legislative approaches, so far made to seek solution have failed to yield satisfactory results. It is high time that we should try to tackle these problems academically by setting up a two tier archival structure comprising at least one local history society in a selected post-graduate College in each district and one in Archival Cell in a selected University in each State/ Union Territory to be financed by the Indian Council of Historical Research and the University Grants Commission.

References

1. *Proceedings of the Indian Historical Records Commission,* Volume XVII p. 11-12.

2. *Estimate Committee* (1968-69), *Fourth Lok Sabha* Sixty Ninth Report p. 49.

3. *Proceedings of the Indian Historical Records Commission,* Vol. XIII, p. 180.

4. *The Antiquities* (*Export Control Act* 1947) A(I) Para 2.

5. *The Antiquities and Art Treasures Act* (1972) Clause 2 (ii).

6. *Ibid,* Clause 20.